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The Hardware Lab

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Description

How does a new teaching assistant handle a student with a learning disability? What responsibility does the university and/or faculty members have to train a graduate student in the university's policies? This case explores the potential conflicts between students, TA's and faculty when policy is not clearly defined.

Body

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Part 1

The students in the lab sections for an engineering course are required to work in pairs. Laurie, a first-year graduate student, is assigned as the assistant for the lab sections at the beginning of her first term. During the fifth week of classes, Laurie is approached by Fred, who says that his partner, Mike, is never prepared and that he spends at least 30 minutes during each two-hour lab explaining the material to Mike. The rest of the time, Fred explains, he ends up performing the experiments while Mike only watches.

Laurie mentally notes that Mike has been asking a lot of procedural questions during lab time, which has been cutting into her ability to spend an equal amount of time with the other teams. At the next lab session, Laurie reiterates that she expects all students to email their procedural questions to her beforehand so that she will not have to use lab time to answer these questions.

Discussion Questions

1. As Laurie understands her job, she is to demonstrate the use of the lab hardware to the students, review relevant material from the lecture during the lab, and answer any questions about the experiments. However, she is also concerned that Mike and Fred are having problems. Should Laurie actively get involved in helping to solve their partnership difficulties?
2. Laurie knows that the professor will not allow Fred and Mike to find new partners. Should she even bother telling the professor about this problem?
3. What other options does Laurie have?
4. If Laurie asks Mike for his opinions on his understanding of, and progress in, the lab, and he insists that he is fine, does she have any obligations beyond those described in Question 1?

5. As a first-quarter graduate student, Laurie has not been trained as a TA, although she is enrolled in a concurrent class that familiarizes new graduate students with several aspects of being a TA. Her assistantship represents her major source of funding for the school year. Given the lack of training for new graduate students before the academic year starts, what obligations do the professor and the department have to Laurie and her students in terms of training, accessibility and accountability?

Part 2

Laurie decides to ask the professor for advice. After hearing her explanation of the situation, the professor tells Laurie that Mike has a special-learning waiver that requires that he be given extra time for reading-based tests. The professor tells her to give Mike some extra time for the lab exam, but that the partnership must either continue or dissolve without changing partners. Laurie subsequently tells Fred that he cannot partner with another student and that she can't help with partnership problems.

Two weeks before the term ends, Laurie finishes writing the lab exam and announces the testing schedule. The exam focuses on a practical demonstration of the use of the lab hardware, but it does include a short written portion. The exam is expected to take 20 minutes. Mike approaches her after this announcement and tells her that he has a special-learning waiver and should therefore have more time. Laurie lets him know that she is aware of the waiver and reassures him. Because the test is mostly a hands-on hardware demonstration, he should not have a problem; however, because the test requires some reading, he will have 10 extra minutes. Mike appears mollified.

Discussion Questions

6. Who is responsible for informing Laurie about the waiver, and during what time frame? Is she responsible for determining this information herself?

7. Laurie believes that Mike's waiver does not apply to the nonreading portion of the exam. Is that fair to Mike?

8. Is Laurie qualified to make this decision? Is it ethical for her to make this decision herself?

Part 3

Approximately 35 percent of the students easily pass the lab exam. Other students take longer, but most complete 80 percent of the test. Two students do not complete any portion of the test, including the make-or-break hardware demonstrations. One of these students is Mike, who is very upset and complains about the time constraints. Laurie realizes that she definitely underestimated the time to complete the test; however, through observation of Mike during the test she believes that the major factor in Mike's performance was a lack of understanding of the lab equipment.

Discussion Questions

9. Should Laurie have let Mike simply demonstrate understanding of the equipment, regardless of how long it took?
10. Should Laurie have made similar provisions for the other student who failed the exam?
11. Would other students have a legitimate reason to oppose this strategy?

Notes

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